

Breaking the Cycle, One Child at a Time

Harmony at Home Provides In-School Interventions

BY BRETT WILBUR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLI ULDALL



(Left) Harmony at Home Executive Director Julianne Leavy with mental health advocate Savannah Alvarez, a past program participant. The nonprofit aims to “end the cycles of violence and abuse by empowering children and young adults...”

Thirteen years ago, Carmel therapist Julianne Leavy, along with her brother Michael Leavy, started the nonprofit Harmony at Home (HAH) to put counselors into schools to work with children traumatized by violence. The program started in Salinas; now 41 Monterey County schools have the

Sticks & Stones program, which serves children who have been affected by violence of any kind.

“There were no services for traumatized children in Salinas who had been exposed to escalating violence,” Executive Director Julianne Leavy says. “Now the program includes 12 schools on the Peninsula.”

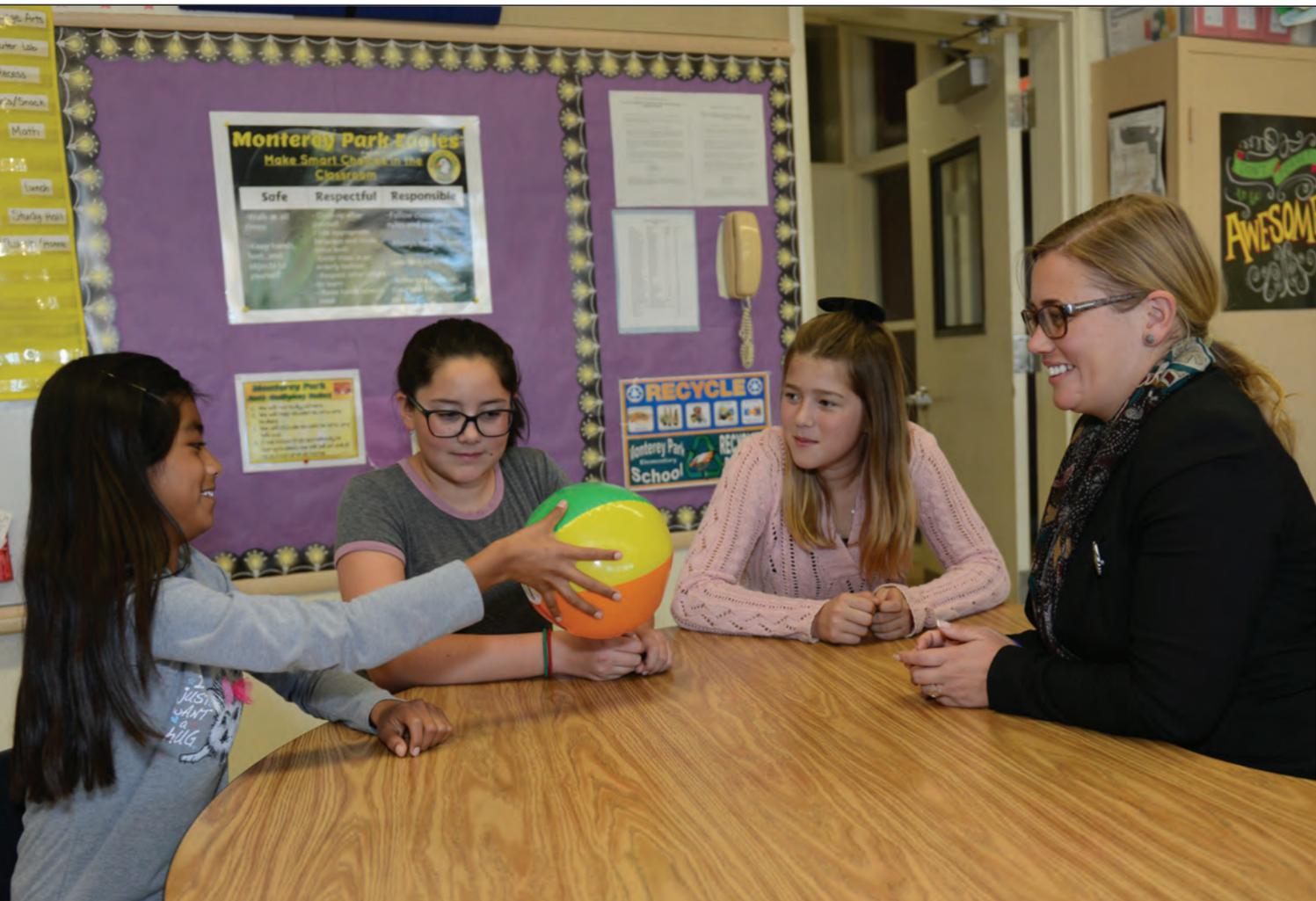
An anti-bullying program known as Olweus (which originated in Norway) soon fell under the HAH umbrella. “I always knew I wanted to do bullying prevention,” Leavy says, “but I did not want a Band-Aid. A one-day workshop is not effective. You can have great intentions and show kindness but you need it every week, and



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Children at Monterey Park Elementary School in Salinas learn to be role models in the community. Harmony at Home brought an anti-bullying program to the school.



Harmony at Home (HAH) Bullying Prevention Coordinator Sarah Behm (far right) works with students on understanding the differences between bullying, conflict resolution, mean moments and teasing.



Julianne Leavy and Bullying Prevention Coordinator Sarah Behm; Monterey Park Elementary School Principal Brian Hays and Vice Principal Victor Marinelli.

you need a top-down approach. We need the administrators, the teachers and the non-teaching staff all trained. It's not the children's problem. It's about providing a model."

Leavy says the program teaches a new way of speaking to children, with the adults engaged and helping them feel important. "We have to change the climate and the culture of the school for it to truly be a safe place for children to be," she says. "Bullying and drug abuse and violence does not discriminate between socioeconomic, racial or ethnic groups or location. Every single school should have an anti-bullying program in place."

Brian Hays is the principal of Monterey Park Elementary School in Salinas, and was con-

cerned when he discovered the kids at his school were not feeling safe. "Two years ago, we assessed all of our students..." he says. "Most of our students were not reporting bullying, but they had fear of being bullied."

Harmony at Home brought the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program to the school and also implemented a buddy bench for students. Kids who felt left out were invited to sit on the bench at recess and all the children were trained to approach a child and invite them to play.

"We weren't sure it would work," Hays says. "A group of student council members went out

and tested it themselves and within a few minutes it was working."

The anti-bullying program uses positive behavioral intervention systems to provide plans for altering behaviors, and is inclusive, rather than just using consequences and punishments.

"Academically we are preparing our kids for the 21st century," Hays says. "They need to be able to communicate and collaborate and be critical thinkers, and they need to be positive citizens as well. We reach out and support each other and work together not just on academics but on wellness. Olweus is amazing and has

transformed our school into a much more positive and happier place."

Savannah Alvarez started individual counseling with Julianne Leavy as a teenager on her grandfather's advice.

"I had a very, very rough childhood," Alvarez shares. "I had a dysfunctional family. When I was 16, my mom was on drugs and she had just come back from rehab. I was acting out. My stepdad was really abusive, and I was also sexually assaulted [by someone else.] I didn't have any coping skills, except negative ones. I saw the



Monterey Park Elementary School Principal Brian Hays works with students to help them understand that bullying is an imbalance of power. "Our motto is to stand up, stand together and stand strong," he says.



Tina Ramos teaches 6th grade at Monterey Park; Santos Rodriguez is a Playworks Coach; and Mariko Caster is a Special Day Class teacher.

world as a dark and scary place and I assumed that people wanted to hurt you. There were no good people in the world. I turned to drinking and taking pills and I would self-harm."

With Leavy's support, Alvarez joined a girls' teen enrichment camp that Harmony at Home sponsors on properties including those pre-

served by the Big Sur Land Trust. (Leavy's parents Zad and Laela were among the founders of BSLT.)

"The first camp was amazing," Alvarez says. "It totally turned my life around. It was the first time I was around other girls my age who understood hurt like I did and what it was like

to keep secrets within the family and the first time I didn't feel alone...I formed some life-long friendships."

Alvarez says talking to Leavy made her feel like her choices and feelings mattered. "We talked about breaking cycles and how that can create a ripple effect," she says. "If I'm healing, it can help other people heal."

Alvarez took that advice to heart: she's worked as a teen mentor and is now a wellness navigator for those with mental health challenges at Interim, Inc. at the OMNI Resource Center, and at Monterey County's Bienestar Integrated Healthcare Clinic.

"At one point in my life I figured I'd end up on streets or dead," she says, "and I would have been except for Harmony at Home. I'm really happy now and I'm willing to be that voice for others."

For more information, or to donate, please go to www.harmony-at-home.org.

A Call to End Salinas Violence

José Arreola is the Community Safety Administrator for the city of Salinas and the Director of CASP, the Community Alliance for Safety and Peace. In 2009, he says, the city of Salinas set a record for homicides and violence, exceeding cities like Chicago and Detroit for incidences per capita. At the time, Salinas violence was primarily made up of gang-based crimes with victims and perpetrators mostly under the age of 24.

"It is really a staggering problem," Arreola says. "CASP was formed by the power brokers in the County who came together to strategize, 'What can we do better to address the issue?'"

The organization now meets twice a month with more than 50 local agencies. "Agencies like Harmony at Home have an outsized impact," says Arreola. "They are not necessarily directly working with gang-involved youth but working with siblings and families and much



Salinas Community Safety Administrator, José Arreola.

further downstream at early ages. It has a huge impact for potentially not repeating violence from family members...One of the roots of gang violence is angry young men who have a lot of history with domestic violence..."

According to Arreola, youth violence is down 60 percent since CASP formed in 2009, but little is being done on the re-entry piece for ex-convicts coming back into society.

"We have had an uptick in adult violence," he says. "What has happened is there has been a large-scale release of prisoners coming back to our communities with very little services and support, and difficulties...The very thing we

want people to do is have people earn an honest living and we hamstring them. They can't get work after prison...Those [gang] environments still exist and are ready and waiting when they get out."

For more information on CASP, go to www.cityofsalinas.org.